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"A Blueprint for Recycling", Conference of Mayors and National Association of Counties

Max S. Baucus

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Baucus, Max S., "'A Blueprint for Recycling', Conference of Mayors and National Association of Counties" (April 1, 1993). *Max S. Baucus Speeches*. 507.

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Record Type*: **Speeches & Remarks**

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(1) Subject*: **Environment**

(select subject from controlled vocabulary, if your office has one)

(2) Subject* **A Blueprint for Recycling**

DOCUMENT DATE*: **04/01/1993**

(Example: 01/12/1966)

* "required information"



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Remarks of Senator Max Baucus to Conference of Mayors & National Association of Counties A Blueprint for Recycling

April 1, 1993

Over the years, I often have relied on the advice and wisdom of many of you in this room. As the new chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee I will rely on you even more. That only makes sense. You are at the center of creativity in government -- the experimental laboratories for new approaches to problem solving. Your experiences may bring just the needed spark to push an idea from concept to statute to implementation. And your ideas and experiences have never been more important as they are now.

I say that for a simple reason. We are on the brink of an extraordinary time in our nation's history. As we approach the 21st century, we are entering more than a new millennium. We are entering a new age of global capitalism, and a new era of environmental policy-making.

This new period calls for new thinking. One where all levels of government, and businesses of all sizes and shapes, must join forces, innovate, and focus on the future. But as George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." So let me step back for a moment to try to put things in perspective.

An Historical Perspective

Later this month we will celebrate the twenty-third anniversary of Earth Day -- the day that traditionally marks the birth of our nation's "Golden Age" of the environment. For the decade that followed, Congress passed the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and other landmark laws. We set national standards and challenged our experts. In the end, we cleansed the air and clarified our water.

Then came the "Dark Ages", noted for the conservative backlash, stalemate, and mistrust that followed. We responded with new legislation. States and cities passed their own environmental laws. We averted disaster, but we made little progress, and even fell behind some nations.

*Enviro
: recycling*

An Environmental Renaissance

We are now entering an environmental renaissance. Congress and the Administration are led by Democrats. The President and Vice President are firmly committed to progressive policies. At long last, we have leaders who understand that we don't have to choose between a clean environment and a strong economy.

They understand that a clean environment and a strong economy are really two sides of the same coin. Both depend on planning ahead; investing in the future rather than squandering resources; building a better life for our children.

Design for Recycling

Our nation's 12 billion-ton waste heap is perhaps the most visible example of just how wasteful and inefficient we are. If we are to become more productive we can no longer squander our resources. We must use what we have more efficiently. And recycling is one of the best places to start.

Recycling uses fewer raw materials, consumes less energy, and generates lower pollution, than producing new products with virgin materials. Using recycled aluminum, for example means that 20 new cans can be made with the same energy that would be necessary to produce just one from bauxite ore. That's a 95 percent energy savings. And since we import bauxite, the more we recycle aluminum, the less bauxite we need to import, and the better our trade balance looks.

Fortunately, it's not just aluminum that benefits from recycling. Making products from recycled plastics can save 92 to 98 percent of the energy used to produce single virgin resins. And for every ton of paper that we recycle, we save 4,100 kilowatt hours of energy, 7,000 gallons of water, 60 pounds of air polluting effluents, and three cubic yards of landfill space.

If we are to be serious about recycling two things must happen:

First, industry must design their products with an eye toward recycling. That means using materials that can be recycled, and designing products that can be easily collected, sorted and reused. Business has made "green" its favorite color for public relations. But it hasn't yet realized that the true "green-ness" of a product determines the "green-ness" of its profits.

Second, and most important to the people in this room, we must stimulate demand for recycled materials. You have been at the forefront in getting Americans to recycle. The active and

growing public support for municipal recycling programs is the strongest indication of your success.

But you and I also know that even if you collect every last can, container and piece of scrap paper it won't solve your recycling problems. All the papers you pick up -- all the glass and plastic you haul in -- isn't going to do much good unless you have a market to sell them. As Mayor Jimmy Kemp of Meridian, Mississippi said, "if you're not buying recycled products, you're not really recycling."

In fact, it's counterproductive, discouraging, and costly, to collect recyclables only to throw them away when the market for them collapses. But that's what's happening in many cities. In fact, according to a recent survey of 258 city officials, it is the lack of markets that is the biggest barrier to successful recycling.

That my friends, is our collective problem today. Unless there is a real national market for recycling, all of your efforts will be wasted. And unless companies begin to design their products so they can be recycled they won't want your recyclables.

On the other hand, creating strong, stable markets should not be that tough. It's happening in Europe as I saw first hand last year. Europe has some of the most aggressive recycling programs in the world.

Look at Germany, for example. Not only do they require all retailers to take back and recycle packaging they also require automakers to take back old cars. And it seems to be working. BMW is learning how to make cars out of recycled parts. And other companies operating in Germany, including many American companies, are now using less packaging.

While the European recycling programs can not be adopted directly in America, there are some ideas that I believe will prove useful for us, and helpful to you. And I am committed to turning these ideas, into new laws so that your recycling programs will survive.

A Blueprint for Recycling

My blueprint for recycling includes four fundamental principles.

- . First, we must provide Federal leadership.
- . Second, we must focus on the worst problems first.
- . Third, we must guarantee a shared responsibility between government and business.
- . And finally we must provide certainty.

Let me explain each of these principles.

First, the Federal government must set an example for the nation that recycling is important and valuable. One of the easiest ways to send the message is through federal procurement. The government is a large consumer of products that can be made with recycled materials. We have made progress in buying recycled products, but we can do better. In some cases, product specifications actually discourage agencies from buying recycled products. This is not right. So my blueprint for recycling will require all Federal agencies to review their procurement guidelines, and set aside a portion of their procurement budget for recycled products.

That's the easy part. But if recycling is going to survive and even prosper, we will need to do more -- much more. The cornerstone of my strategy rests on the principle that I call, "manufacturers' responsibility for the life-cycle of a product". In other words, anyone who sells a product should also be responsible for the product when it becomes waste. Thus, the costs associated with collecting, sorting, transporting, reprocessing, recycling, and returning materials back into commerce, can be internalized and reflected in the price of the product.

What's more, it should be in the interest of each manufacturer to improve recycling technology. And to better design their products and packaging so they can be recycled more easily and less expensively. That's just not happening now. Most manufacturers design their products without thinking about what happens to their products after they sell them. That's because manufacturers don't pay the cost of disposing or recycling their products once they become waste. Taxpayers do. Not only is that unfair, it's inefficient. Let me explain.

I am always a taxpayer -- but I am only sometimes a consumer, and only for certain items. If I buy a product that is difficult and costly to recycle, shouldn't I pay more for my product? When taxpayers foot the recycling bill, as we do now, I am being subsidized for being wasteful. By asking product manufacturers to share in the responsibility and cost of recycling, I'll end up paying my fair share. That's because manufacturers can reflect their recycling costs in the price of their products. Thus, the cost of recycling is shifted from the taxpayer to the consumer, where it should be.

The third principle of my recycling blueprint is that we should focus on the worst problems first. That means targeting the big guys. And it means focusing on packaging and paper waste which account for half of our municipal garbage. It's also where you are focusing most of your efforts, and where I've been told you need the most help. Eventually we may want to expand the

framework to include durable goods, but we need to start somewhere.

Finally, if there is one thing I've learned from my years as a legislator it's that business wants certainty. They need it for financing and investment decisions. When it comes to recycling, that means recycling rates and dates. Germany and the Netherlands understand that and have adopted strict directives. Eighty percent recycling by 1995, in Germany, and 90 percent recycling by year 2000 in the Netherlands. And the European Community is considering a 60 percent recycling rate by 2000. We too must set rates and dates.

Legislative Options

Clearly, there are a number of ways to stimulate recycling and provide the kind of certainty that business needs and shared responsibility that your communities need.

One option I am considering is setting minimum content standards for packaging and paper products. A number of states have already done this, especially for newsprint. But while minimum content requirements provide certainty, and may be working well for newsprint, it is not the silver bullet. In the opinion of former EPA Administrator Bill Ruckelshaus, minimum content may not work as well for other commodities as it does for newsprint. For food packaging, for example, a utilization rate that mandates recycling without specifying the amount in each package, may work better.

I am also exploring ways to more directly use the power of the market-place to stimulate recycling. One particular market-based option that I am examining, is a "waste utilization tax". The idea is to set a per unit tax and a national utilization rate for recovered materials. The more the recycled content, the lower the tax. And there would be no tax on items that met the national recycling rates. What's more, the revenue generated by the waste utilization tax could be used for deficit reduction. But like any tax, they're unpopular and may be difficult to administer. Even so, it may be the best way to fairly and efficiently promote recycling.

There are still other ways to stimulate recycling. Definining terms like recycling and standardizing federal and state procurement regulations may also help. I am considering these as well.

In evaluating these and other options, my goal is to develop and advance a recycling proposal that is predictable, orderly and simple. The roles of the federal, state and local governments warrant particular attention in this regard.

The products and packages we seek to recycle are sold throughout the nation in interstate commerce. If we are going to avoid a crazy patchwork of recycling requirements, we must promote a uniform system. No manufacturer should be expected to meet different recycling standards in each state. A tough national standard makes more sense.

Last Congress my recycling initiative would have made big business a full partner in your recycling efforts. With your help and strong support, I will be prepared to make this journey again. I have spoken with the Administration, and they too want to close the recycling loop. I expect to be working with them to see that it happens.

During the next few months I also plan to work closely with you and others with first-hand experience in this area. I want your ideas on specific legislation. I plan to introduce a recycling bill by the summer and I need your enthusiastic support.

You need to tell your Congressmen and women, your Senators and the Administration, of your recycling dilemma. Your constituents need to tell us their stories. It is better if my colleagues hear it from you than from me. It's even better if we hear it from our constituents.

Local officials such as yourselves, have tremendous credibility in Congress. You are the E.F. Huttons' of the Hill. When you speak, we all listen. If you really want us to pass recycling legislation, then together we can make it happen.

Conclusion

We have the capacity to solve our recycling problems. As I said earlier, we are on the brink of an environmental renaissance. We must take advantage of this new opportunity. It won't be easy, and at times we will get frustrated. So as we begin this journey we should probably remind ourselves why it's so important.

Recycling is really about becoming a less wasteful society, using our resources more efficiently, being more competitive. It's a nexus between the environment and the economy. But there's something more. It's about the legacy that we leave to future generations. To our children and our grandchildren. It's up to us. If we work together, innovate, and focus on the future, we'll meet the challenge.